

ARTICLE APPEARS
ON PAGE 2-A

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Casey's role on visits to Syria, Israel called 'exercise in crisis prevention'

By Martin Sieff
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CIA Director William Casey, besides trying to secure the release of American hostages held in Lebanon, may have acted as a go-between for Israel and Syria to avert the threat of another Middle East war.

Israeli security sources confirmed yesterday that Mr. Casey visited the country in July, but — in an unusual development in peacetime — Israeli military censors prevented the British news agency Reuters from reporting the subject of the talks.

Administration sources had earlier confirmed that Mr. Casey visited Syria, despite a denial from Damascus, and they added that Mr. Casey was a "frequent visitor" to Israel.

They would not comment on a U.S. television report that Mr. Casey went to both countries to avert a possible Syrian strike into the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights.

But Joyce Starr, director of the Near East program at the Georgetown Center for Strategic and International Studies, speculated Mr. Casey's mission was "an exercise in crisis prevention."

Another expert said, "Casey was concerned enough by the Syrian war threats to act as the go-between to defuse the war scare."

Tension between Israel and Syria has risen considerably this year.

In May, Israeli military officials said new Syrian tank emplacements in the

Bekaa Valley of eastern Lebanon, about 20 miles from the Israeli border, were interpreted by them as preparations for war.

At the time, Israel Army chief of staff Lt.-Gen. Moshe Levy warned Syria would risk unspecified Israeli military action if it increased the size of its force in Lebanon.

However, the following month, Syria deployed a squadron of tanks near the town of Mashrara in the Bekaa, close to the "red line" which has informally marked the limit of Syrian influence in southern Lebanon.

After King Hussein of Jordan visited Damascus for talks with Mr. Assad last week, the Syrian forces in eastern Lebanon's Bekaa Valley were said to have been reinforced with Soviet-made surface-to-surface missiles, and Syrian divisions on the Golan Heights, held by Israel since the 1967 Six Day War, were reportedly put on 50 percent alert.

The authoritative British journal Jane's Defense Weekly has predicted Syria will wage a limited war against Israel this year to reconquer Golan. Jane's quoted moderate Arab sources, who said Syria had recently sent emissaries to a number of Arab countries, including Jordan and Libya, to explain its plans.

Jane's also said the planned political change of power in Israel this October might prove an optimum time to launch such a surprise attack. Prime Minister Shimon Peres of the Labor Party is due to yield power to Foreign Minister Yitzhak Shamir of the right-wing Likud Party under the rotation agreement of the National Unity Government.

Israeli "resolve and political cohesiveness" will be "at its lowest ebb" then, the magazine said. "It is clear that Israel has seldom been in a weaker political and military position."

Continuing Israeli fears over the danger of war with Syria were reflected in the briefings and speeches given for American reporters in Israel in early July by the Washington Institute for Near East Policy.

Senior Israeli defense officials and military officers told the reporters that in the past year Syria has developed the option of making a powerful surprise attack to recapture Golan.

Israeli Defense Minister Yitzhak Rabin and other top Israeli military officials told the reporters their strategy was to convince Mr. Assad his initial thrust would not be successful, and that even if it were, Israel would not yield to superpower pressure to stop fighting until it had responded decisively.

Syria's reported acquisition of Soviet SS-21 surface-to-surface missiles has also been viewed with alarm in Israel. The Syrians already have at least 80 Soviet-made SCUD surface-to-surface batteries, twice the number they had in 1982.

According to Gulf sources, when Mr. Assad and Vice President Abdel Halim Khaddem made a secret visit to Moscow on March 17, they were assured the Soviets would supply them with a nuclear shield in the event of war with Israel and/or the United States.

The Soviets promised the use of Back-



CIA Director William Casey

fire bombers and warheads for Syria's SCUD-B missiles, if Israel threatened to use nuclear weapons against them, one source said.

Syria has at least 2,000 tanks and six divisions, comprising 72,000 men, between Kuneitra, on the Golan Heights, and Damascus, 42 miles to the east. One Israeli official said, "They can switch on and go" in the event of war.

President Assad is known to be obsessed with the idea of not only retaking Golan, but of destroying Israel, and believes in the Islamic cult of martyrdom, known as "shahadah."

On March 8, he celebrated Syria's Revolution Day by stating: "Let our generation be the generation of death for the sanctification of God! We have a date soon with our brothers on the Golan, in Palestine and in southern Lebanon, by the will of Allah on the day of victory."